

2018

# Introduction: Lives, trials, and executions: Perspectives on crime c.1700c.1900

Saunders, Samuel

Saunders, Samuel and Basdeo, Stephen (2018) 'Introduction: Lives, trials, and executions: Perspectives on crime c.1700c.1900', SOLON Law, Crime and History, 8(1), p. 1-4.

<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/14283>

---

SOLON Law, Crime and History

University of Plymouth

---

*All content in PEARL is protected by copyright law. Author manuscripts are made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the details provided on the item record or document. In the absence of an open licence (e.g. Creative Commons), permissions for further reuse of content should be sought from the publisher or author.*

**INTRODUCTION**  
**LIVES, TRIALS, AND EXECUTIONS:**  
**PERSPECTIVES ON CRIME**  
**c.1700–c.1900**

***Samuel Saunders and Stephen Baseo*<sup>1</sup>**

This special issue of *Law, Crime and History* takes its theme from a conference organised by Samuel Saunders and Stephen Basdeo, held at Liverpool John Moores University in 2017. The title of the conference was ‘Lives, Trials, and Executions: Perspectives on Crime, c.1700 – c. 1900’.<sup>2</sup> The conference brief was deliberately left suitably broad to encourage as many ‘perspectives on crime’ as possible from a wide range of researchers working in a variety of fields. Consequently, over 40 papers were delivered by researchers from a diverse range of disciplines, including history, literature, law, criminology, and museum studies.

This issue commences with an article written by Nell Darby. Darby brings readers’ attention to the case of a nineteenth century female murderer, Mary Eleanor Piercey. In 1892, Piercey murdered her lover’s wife, Phoebe Hogg, along with Hogg’s child. One might expect that having heard news of this horrendous crime, the press would have censured her by depicting her as a monster. Yet Piercey was an awkward offender for Victorian journalists: she was young, beautiful, and relatively well-educated: she could not easily be portrayed as a desperate and depraved criminal. As Darby shows, Piercey’s depiction in contemporary newspapers was often presented in a sympathetic and supportive way. This manner of reportage thus subverted typical portrayals of the Victorian female murderer.

It cannot be denied that the public at large, whenever they consume stories of crime, be it in newspapers, books, film, and television, are often more interested in the histories of criminals rather than the victims. This was certainly the case in Georgian and Victorian popular culture with a reading public hungry for sensationalised tales of robbers and murderers. Even in later detective stories, the focus was on both the police officer and the criminal.<sup>3</sup> Rarely do any accounts of crime, in both a historical and modern context, give much attention to the victim. Undeniably, this neglect of the victim is also found in scholarly works. With this in mind, Clare

---

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Saunders, PhD Candidate, Liverpool John Moores University [S.J.Saunders@2014.ljmu.ac.uk](mailto:S.J.Saunders@2014.ljmu.ac.uk) and Stephen Basdeo Lecturer, Richmond American International University (Leeds RIASA) [BASDEOS@Richmond.ac.uk](mailto:BASDEOS@Richmond.ac.uk).

<sup>2</sup> For a review of the conference in this journal see Rhiannon Pickin, ‘Conference Report: Lives, Trials and Executions: Perspectives on Crime c.1700-c.1900, 24 May 2017’, *Law, Crime and History*, 7: 1 (2017), pp. 164-68.

<sup>3</sup> See Judith Rowbotham, Kim Stevenson and Samantha Pegg, *Crime News in Modern Britain: Press Reporting and Responsibility 1850-2010* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

Sandford-Couch and Helen Rutherford aim, in their article, to re-centre the victim in their analysis of the 1863 murder of Margaret Dockerty in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. The authors use historical sources to construct a picture of the victim and bring to light her connections with the criminal. In so doing, Sandford-Couch and Rutherford present us with a much more comprehensive account of the crime, as well as re-establishing Dockerty's identity and position within the narrative.

Sandford-Couch and Rutherford's paper at the conference was part of the same panel as one delivered by Patrick Low. The editors thank these three scholars for resubmitting their papers for publication in this issue for, while Sandford-Couch and Rutherford examine Margaret Dockerty, Low sets the story of her killer, George Vass, in context. Yet Low does much more than this: he focuses on representations of public executions in the North East and challenges the idea that in the practice of public executions, the provinces simply followed London's lead in modifying the process of capital punishment. Low argues that the disparity in the number of executions taking place in the regions outside of the capital, compared to the number taking place within it, distorts this narrative. Low adds complexity to the narrative of reforms to public executions outside the capital, focusing on the North East and Newcastle through presenting a variety of case studies. He argues that local circumstances forced changes to the ways public executions were performed such as a lack of space, lack of a prison, crowd behaviour and even traffic jams caused by the execution procession, as well as established traditions that were becoming outdated. The articles contained herein by Sandford-Couch, Rutherford, and Low, as well as re-centering the victim, also offer a much-needed regional perspective on the history of crime in the nineteenth century.

The study of Victorian popular fiction has in the last two decades entered into the academic mainstream and the increasing focus upon it in the last decade has been facilitated, in part, by digitisation projects and the establishment of societies such as the Victorian Popular Fiction Association and the Crime Fiction Association. A major player in the nineteenth century penny publishing world was George William MacArthur Reynolds (1814-79). While lacking the canonicity of other Victorian authors such as Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, William Makepeace Thackeray, and George Elliot, Reynolds was no less popular in his time. Stephen Basdeo's article examines the portrayal of organised crime in Reynolds's *Mysteries of London* (1844-48). Basdeo takes criminologist Mark Galeotti's definition of organised crime and measures Reynolds's portrayal of a criminal subculture against it. While Reynolds was the radical friend of the poor, and his anti-aristocratic, anti-monarchical politics shine through in his works, he is under no illusions about the extent of criminality that existed among the Victorian working classes. They are at their most dangerous when they band together into

criminal networks but their activities are often encouraged and facilitated by the upper classes. This is convenient for Reynolds whose own radical ideology emphasises the virtues of the middle and respectable working classes. Thus, as Basdeo further argues, Reynolds's radicalism looks back to pre-1832 reform movements; through studying Reynolds's portrayal of criminality in both high and low life, scholars can gain a greater understanding of his radical thought.

Another literary perspective on crime is found in Samuel Saunders' article which explores connections between Georgian crime writing, and the influx of police memoir fiction around the early-to-mid-nineteenth century. Saunders argues that crime writing, in the form of the execution broadside, the *Ordinary of Newgate's* Accounts, and the *Newgate Calendars* fuelled a pseudo-voyeuristic interest in readers, as they purported to go behind the scenes into private and inaccessible criminal spaces and revealing the scenes that took place inside them for readers. These included prison cells, courtrooms and the moments before executions. These spaces, popularised by crime writing were replicated in mid-Victorian police memoirs, which used the protective presence of a literary police officer to penetrate private criminal spaces such as urban slums, public houses, prisons and crime scenes and publicise them for readers. Overall, Saunders argues that this creates a new narrative strand in the evolution of the detective genre, which has historically focused on the literary links between late eighteenth century Gothic fiction, the short stories featuring the private detective C. Auguste Dupin by Edgar Allan Poe, and mid-Victorian sensation fiction.

Daniel Johnson's article explores the construction of stereotypical views of criminals and poverty in Victorian Britain through interpretations and exhibitions in contemporary prison museums. Johnson uses two prison museums as representative examples, the Victorian Prison Museum at Lincoln Castle and the York Castle Museum to suggest that many prisoners exhibited as examples in prison museums came from working class, poorer or impoverished backgrounds, and seeks to understand how and why this is the case. He argues that primary material on display is limited meaning that interpretation for visitors to the museums is restricted to audio-visual technology in order to try and capture their target audience. This comes with its own problems such as audience participation and attentiveness, as the article explores. For example, Johnson argues that such material, created today out of older source material, can be corrupted by both modern interpretations of historical sources and the desire on the part of the museum to make any audio-visual material utilised in exhibitions as educational as possible. This article, overall, presents a unique perspective on exploring the history of crime, by placing it in a public sphere and questioning its accuracy, its stereotypes and its construction at a fundamental level.

While the main focus of the conference was British crime history during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the conference attracted international scholars working on the history of crime in Canada, Australia, and Austria. The organisers are especially thankful to Daniela Fasching and Claudia Resch for agreeing to submit an article on their exciting research project based upon eighteenth century Austrian execution broadsheets that have recently been discovered in Vienna's City Library. Although public executions were a prominent part of the Austrian Empire's justice system until these sources' discovery researchers in Austria knew very little about execution literature in that country. With the digitisation and research into such sources being carried out by Fasching, Resch, and their colleagues, our understanding of cultural responses to crime in early modern Europe will be enhanced and it is hoped that the publication of Fasching and Resch's article in an English language journal will provide a fruitful avenue for comparative analyses of European execution literature.

A journal special issue could never truly reflect the truly impressive range of papers that were presented at the conference. However, the editors would like to thank all of the attendees who presented papers, including Heather Shore, who gave an informative and insightful keynote at the conference. Special thanks, of course, go to the authors who have contributed to this issue. Last, but certainly by no means least, the editors' thanks go to Kim Stevenson, Judith Rowbotham, and Samantha Pegg for allowing them to take the reins of this issue.